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SUBJECT: TIES THAT BIND: AZERI INFLUENCE OVER TURKEY

REF: A. ANKARA 1487
[1](#)B. BAKU 829
[1](#)C. BAKU 201

Classified By: Ambassador James Jeffrey, for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: As the Turkey-Armenia protocols begin to percolate in the Turkish Parliament (SEPTTEL), Azerbaijan's influence on Turkish public opinion will be pivotal. Given the close cultural, historical and linguistic ties between the Turks and Azerbaijanis, the Turkish public appears unwilling to countenance any negative fallout for Azerbaijan -- a stance that plays to Baku's advantage. The emotional connection seems to resonate more than Baku's attempted threats in the energy field. Many Turks seemed offended by Baku's recent decision to take down the Turkish flag at a martyrs' monument, and this move drew a scold from PM Erdogan and even a reproach from MHP Leader Bahceli. Still, we see no real shift in Turkey's "brotherly" attitude toward an ally considered even closer than the "TRNC." This does not bode well for speedy ratification of the Turkey-Armenia protocols, since Turkish MPs will feel obliged to heed Azerbaijan's insistence on Nagorno-Karabakh progress first. Even so, there is a widespread expectation that the Turkey-Armenia border will be opened and relations normalized. Azerbaijan's influence may be felt more in the timing than in the result.
END SUMMARY.

How It All Began

[1](#)2. (C) Any consideration of the Turkey-Azerbaijan relationship must start with Turkey's position and actions in the early 1990's during the Nagorno-Karabakh war that culminated in Turkey breaking relations with Yerevan and closing the border. In 1993 as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict continued and intensified, Turkey closed the border in solidarity with Azerbaijan. Following the border closure, direct land communications with Armenia were cut, and diplomatic relations were never established. Since this time, Turkey has maintained that opening of the border and normalization of relations rest on a solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. Even as the most recent round of talks began, GOT officials have repeatedly assured the Turkish people and Baku that they have not forgotten why they closed the border.

"They Are Our Brothers"

[1](#)3. (C) Turkish public opinion is naturally inclined toward Azerbaijan, a Turkic country with whom it has close cultural, linguistic, and historical ties. Religion is trickier; Azeris are Shia, Turks are "officially" mainly Sunni. Furthermore, the Aliyev regime is not just formally, but violently secular, and distrusts PM Erdogan's, his party's,

and his sometime "ally" Fethullah Gulen's plans for Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan and Turkey participate together in numerous Turkic Summits, councils and cultural events -- all of which do not include Armenia. Streets and public areas in Turkey are often found bearing the name "Azerbaijan" or "Baku." As a Turkish official working at a border gate between Turkey and Azerbaijan told us, "They are our brothers. They speak the same language. We are the same."

14. (C) Public opinion on Azerbaijan has also been something of Turkey's own making. Its more active foreign policy under FM Davutoglu has led the GOT to promote deeper and more diverse relations with Azerbaijan and the other Turkic countries. The slogan "two states, one nation" is often used by GOT leaders when referring to Azerbaijan, and according to Sinan Ogan at the Caucasus-focused think tank TURKSAM, is considered as a core element of Turkish policy toward Azerbaijan -- supported, he said, by the vast majority of Turks.

15. (C) Given the affection that Turks feel toward Azerbaijan, it should be no surprise that Azerbaijan can use these "brotherly" feelings to its advantage in pressing its interests on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. Both Azerbaijan officials in Baku and the Azerbaijani Embassy and Consulates within Turkey have been active in promoting their cause and discouraging Turkey-Armenia normalization before the Nagorno-Karabakh issue is solved. According to Kaan Soyak, head of the Turkish Armenian Business Development Council, the Azerbaijani Consulate in Kars has vigorously worked against his efforts to develop business links between Turkey and Armenia -- and has lobbied against him personally. An

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example of Azeri outreach came during this year's Ramadan, where a festival in an Ankara district featured "Azerbaijani night." A central display presented photos of the "Nagorno-Karabakh Genocide" which included graphic depictions of dead Azerbaijani women and children, allegedly at the hands of Armenians. The hundreds of Turkish festival attendees took note.

Bid to Diffuse Tensions

16. (C) A glimpse of Azeri sway over Turkish public opinion was seen after the April 22 joint announcement between Turkey and Armenia. Despite then MFA U/S Apakan's assurances that the GOT kept Aliyev informed about the protocols, Baku disagreed. The angry reaction from Azerbaijan forced Turkey to issue numerous reassuring statements that it would never do anything against Azerbaijan's interests. The GOT seemed to learn from this and worked more closely to prepare Baku for the October 10 signing. The result was an initially contained reaction from Aliyev and the GOAJ. However, this calm rests on a sensitive foundation, and the slightest incident can set off a new "crisis" in the relationship. The outcry from Azerbaijan following Turkey's ban on Azeri flags at the Turkey-Armenia soccer degenerated into a retaliatory removal of Turkish flags from sites in Azerbaijan. The GOT rushed to calm Baku and assure the GOAJ that Nagorno-Karabakh is still a priority. Many analysts, including TOBB International Relations professor Mithat Celikpala, believe that Azerbaijan has such unusual leverage on Turkish public opinion that the Turkish Government felt compelled to act. He suggested that without any significant N-K progress, Azerbaijan might intensify its propaganda campaign. In his view, that would make it nearly impossible for any Turkish MP to support the protocols.

Election Concerns

17. (C) Another factor is the looming prospect of early elections in Turkey. These Parliamentary elections must take place before July 2011 but are rumored to be planned for

2010, perhaps even as early as the spring. The ruling Justice and Development Party faces two difficult and sensitive issues: rapprochement with Armenia and the Democratic (Kurdish) Opening. As elections approach, without visible progress on Nagorno-Karabakh, it will be increasingly difficult for AK Party MPs to support the protocols, and the opposition would certainly exploit Azerbaijani criticism of the ruling party's actions. Suat Kiniklioglu, an MP and one of the Prime Minister's foreign policy advisors, told us recently that without positive movement on Nagorno-Karabakh, it would not be in the Prime Minister's interest to bring the protocols to the Parliament floor.

Limits ... Don't Insult the Flag

¶8. (C) Still, Azerbaijani influence over Turkish public opinion is not unlimited. As Azerbaijani rhetoric against Turkey continued after the April 22 announcement, a backlash in Turkey began to emerge. Some resentment surfaced against Azerbaijani interference in Turkish affairs. Columnists began to question why Turkey was bowing to Azerbaijan when Azerbaijan is not supporting Turkey in Cyprus. Prime Minister Erdogan also came out with several harsh statements to visiting Azerbaijani politicians for questioning Turkish sincerity. This tiring of Azerbaijani interference may be returning. After the October 15 removal of the Turkish flags from a martyr's monument in Baku, PM Erdogan cautioned Azerbaijan that "the Martyrdom Mosque in Azerbaijani...is what really hurt us. I believe that our Azerbaijani brothers will very well assess what hauling down of the Turkish flag in the martyrdom meant." He also toughened his words on Turkish support for Azerbaijan, saying that GOT has told Baku many times that it will not act against Azerbaijani interests, and that Turkey's "Azerbaijani brothers" should not allow any "instigation to mislead the public with slander." In a discussion with us, former Foreign Minister Hikmet Cetin reaffirmed that Azerbaijan is Turkey's closest "ally" but added that the Turkish flag removal incident would not help the Azerbaijani cause. Even Devlet Bahceli, head of the nationalist MHP party and staunch critic of normalization, has warned Azerbaijan not to "mess with the Turkish flag."

The Energy Card

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¶9. (C) Although much has been made in the Turkish press recently about Aliyev's veiled threats regarding energy supplies to Turkey, Azerbaijan does not have the hold on Turkish energy consumption that it would like people to think. For oil, Turkey is mainly a transit country for BTC pipeline oil originating in Azerbaijan. Turkey purchases most of the oil it uses itself from Russia and OPEC countries. Azerbaijan has a history of supplying oil to BTC through its SOCAR state company as part of a consortium, and BTC is Azerbaijan's main route of selling oil to the west. Therefore, the likelihood that Azerbaijan would cut supplies to BTC because of a dispute with Turkey is low, and the effect on Turkey if it did so would be minimal.

¶10. (C) In gas, Turkey is much more vulnerable, but not to the point depicted by Azerbaijan and the Turkish press. Turkey's main gas supplier is Russia, from which it meets around 62 percent of its gas needs, and Russia has also supplied extra gas to Turkey in winter months when other suppliers have not fulfilled their commitments. Azerbaijan currently supplies only about 17 percent of Turkish gas needs from Shah Deniz phase I, and is in negotiations over additional gas from Shah Deniz phase II. Although Aliyev has publicly questioned the "30% of world price" that Turkey pays for phase I gas, the agreement that set this price actually expired in April 2008. Turkey is currently in negotiations with Azerbaijan over a new contract, and has already offered

a higher price.

Shah Deniz II

¶11. (C) Shah Deniz II may be Azerbaijan's trump card in energy, and it has threatened to find other buyers for the volumes currently under negotiation with Turkey. As Turkey would not receive Shah Deniz II gas until 2014, at the earliest, it would not face an immediate crisis should Azerbaijan follow through on its threats. However, although Turkey would have some time to develop other options for additional supplies, such as from Russia, Qatar, or Iraq, both Turkey and Azerbaijan realize Shah Deniz II gas is the easiest and most readily available supply for Turkey.

¶12. (C) The stronger choke hold Azerbaijan has on Turkey, at least initially, is the Nabucco project. Shah Deniz II gas is the only gas available to be committed now for the pipeline to be commercially viable and thus launch construction. Turkey will be a major commercial geostrategic-prestige beneficiary of Nabucco (not for nothing was the Nabucco IGA signing done with great pomp in Ankara.) Azerbaijan's refusing to commit gas to the project could seriously harm Turkey. The most likely scenario is that Azerbaijan will stall the negotiations on Shah Deniz I and II as leverage to press Turkey for more support on Nagorno-Karabakh.

Comment

¶13. (C) From our perspective, the Turkey-Azerbaijan relationship appears somewhat one-sided. Turkey's view of Azerbaijan as its closest ally (according to former FM Cetin, even closer than the Turkish Cypriots) allows Azerbaijan to exploit this sentiment to its advantage. It sometimes pushes hard against Turkish tolerance, as with the Baku flag incident, but it more often succeeds in pushing all the right emotional buttons: portraying itself as the younger "brother" whose friendship and historical links make it beyond reproach and whose interests require defending by Ankara's greater regional clout. The Azeris appear skillful at using both Turkish media outlets and the opposition political parties. Given this context, the GOT needs to move deftly and delicately on the Turkey-Armenia protocols. Most of our contacts, both in government and academia, seem convinced that the border with Armenia will open -- eventually -- and that relations will be fully normalized. Azerbaijan's influence over the process is in how quickly this can be accomplished.

JEFFREY

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